

FLIGHT JACKET

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Marines help Iraqis prepare for elections

Story by Gunnery Sgt. Chago Zapata

11th MEU Combat Correspondent

KARBALA, Iraq — Iraq's upcoming elections are less than a month away and both Iraq officials and coalition forces are concerned about security. Insurgents are desperately doing everything they can to disrupt or prevent the election from happening altogether.

The Iraqi National Guard is going to be one of the main sources of security for voters and election officials alike and everything is being done to prepare them for the challenges looming less than 30 days ahead.

The 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) is tasked with preparing the ING for that mission and many others.

"Our mission in Karbala, mine and Alpha Company's, is to prepare the 401st Battalion, to equip them, train them at the tactical level and in command and control at the battalion level," said 1st Lt. Ann G. Burke, ING liaison officer, 11th MEU (SOC). "We work hand in hand to make sure they have the resources and infrastructure they need to conduct training and missions."

According to Burke, when the MEU first came to Karbala in December, the biggest priority was to consolidate the 401st Battalion, which is currently split over four different locations throughout the province.

"Together, we came up with a plan to consolidate the battalion into two locations, one here in Karbala and the other to the southwest in the city of Ain Al Tamar," Burke said.

One other challenge the ING has faced is the lack of necessary facilities.

"They have no chow hall. Right now all their food is delivered. They had no armory, no battalion aid station, and inadequate sleeping space," Burke said.

Furniture, tactical equipment like dust goggles, helmets, Small Arms Protective Insert plates, medium machine guns and ammunition have all recently been purchased, according to Burke.

"We've been doing all of that and should have everything they need delivered by January 15 and construction should be complete by middle of February," Burke explained. "Construction alone is costing \$1.8 million and the gear is another half a million dollars,

See KARBALA page 5



Standing high atop the air traffic control tower at Al Asad, Iraq, Cpl. Jason E. Chipkin, 21-year-old native of Pawling, N.Y., and air traffic controller Marine Air Control Squadron 1, Marine Air Control Group 38, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, watches as an aircraft takes off Dec. 12. Using only tactical and expeditionary equipment, MACS-1 is closing in on having controlled 200,000 air operations in the Al Anbar Province. Photo by Cpl. Joel A. Chaverri

Air operations reach landmark

Story by Cpl. Joel A. Chaverri

3rd MAW Combat Correspondent

AL ASAD, Iraq — The Marines of Marine Air Control Squadron 1 are reaching landmarks and setting new standards for expeditionary air traffic control in Iraq.

MACS-1, Marine Air Control Group 38, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, along with Marines from MACS-2, 23, 24 and Marine Air Support Squadron 6, are about to reach 200,000 missions in the Al Anbar Province since March of last year, all with expeditionary equipment.

"It may not sound like it, but it's an incredibly large number for the resources we have out here," said Lt. Col. Tim J. Pierson, commanding officer, MACS-1. "Everything from manpower to equipment is stretched thin, but we're still pushing hard."

From March to December 2004, Marine Corps Air Station Miramar supported 77,000 air missions; the Marine Corps air base at Al Asad did 81,000 in the same time.

"The amount of missions we do out here is rivaling, and sometimes beating, bases in the states," said Pierson. "It shows how much work and effort the Marines out here are putting forth to get the job done."

Each squadron is assigned only a handful of Marines to control the air traffic of hundreds of operations conducted every day throughout the province.

"Our tactical equipment was not designed for long

term use," said the 43-year-old from Council Bluffs, Iowa. "We've had to learn to adapt and overcome in many situations to get things working right."

"Permanent" towers have been set up in the back of a humvee and, in one case, on top of living quarters.

"My Marines out there are taking the book on expeditionary traffic control and ripping out pages," he said. "The things we have learned and accomplished during this deployment are helping us rewrite doctrine and tactics that can better prepare squadrons for future operations."

With challenges around every corner, reaching this point was no easy task. On top of few resources, the Marines constantly had to deal with the harsh and unpredictable Iraqi weather.

"Sand is a big problem out here. You never know when a sand storm will hit and it could mess up gear and decrease visibility," said 24-year-old Santa Cruz, Calif., native Staff Sgt. Phillip A. Rogers, operations chief, MACS-1. "We are always dealing with maintenance problems. Keeping gear up and running is an ongoing battle."

"We're playing our small part to make sure that the Iraqi people have a solid basis for their systems," said Pierson. "We've renovated a lot of their old towers and repaired much of the flight line."

"It's not just MACS-1, it's MACS-Iraq," said Pierson. "Everything done by the MACS Marines out here has been done as a team, and I'm proud as hell of them."

Inside

Weekend forecast from Miramar's weather station



67°/45°
Today



65°/45°
Saturday



66°/46°
Sunday

Grunts raid
Ramadi
Pg 6



Building
confidence
Pg 7

